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**Housing Committee Testimony  
Tuesday, February 18, 2020**

Senator Anwar, Representative McGee, and distinguished members of the Housing Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify. My name is Sarah Fox and I am the Director of Advocacy and Community Impact for the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness (CCEH). I speak before you today, representing more than 100 member agencies across our state who are working to end homelessness.

I am here to testify on the following raised bills:

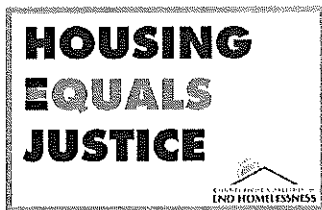
**S.B. No. 105 (RAISED) AN ACT ESTABLISHING A RIGHT TO HOUSING;  
S.B. No. 107 (RAISED) AN ACT ESTABLISHING A TASK FORCE CONCERNING VARIOUS ISSUES  
AT HOMELESS SHELTERS.**

To begin, I would like to address S.B. No. 105 (Raised) An Act Establishing a Right to Housing. CCEH applauds the Housing Committee and its leadership for elevating the need to address our state's homelessness and housing crisis. It is unacceptable in a state as wealthy as Connecticut that we have 10,000 people who experience homelessness every year and that 125,000 households in our state are severely rent burdened or at-risk of eviction or housing loss. Our coalition has been working to end homelessness by ensuring that all households who fall into homelessness and those that are on the verge of homelessness are connected to safe and stable housing. However, our efforts are continually hampered by limitations in resources, which means that there are many households who are not able to receive the help they need to obtain stable and affordable housing.

For instance, through housing-focused problem solving counseling and financial assistance, our Coordinated Access Network system diverts over 5,000 households from shelter into housing each year. But this is only about 40% of the households that show up for CAN appointments. It is about one-quarter of the households that are scheduled by 211 for CAN appointments. For those who our system cannot divert and who wind up in shelters, our system's focus is to match them to available rapid re-housing or supportive units as quickly as possible, but at any given time, there is only one housing program vacancy for every seven households on that housing waiting list.

A true right to housing would ensure that our state provides the resources—and the expectation—that everyone would obtain safe, stable permanent housing. And that would mean ensuring that we have the resources to divert as many households from shelter as possible, and if not diverted, that to help every household in shelter obtain permanent housing.

However, we have concerns that SB 105, as currently written, does not ensure that access to permanent housing. Namely, the second component that focuses on access to emergency accommodations reads like a right to shelter rather than a right to housing. We strongly urge this Committee to not ensure a right to shelter or emergency accommodations. Shelter is a last resort



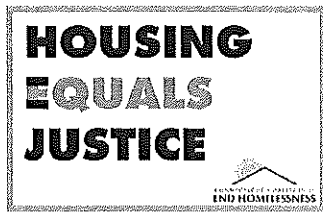
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and are primarily designed to help people stay out of the elements. We have been working to make them places that can help people resolve their homelessness, but mostly, they are about providing the bare minimum roof over people's heads and a place to sleep other than on the street. Our state neighbors two states that have ensured a right to emergency accommodations/shelter through litigation—New York and Massachusetts—and there is broad consensus that all that has done is grown the homeless population, driven up state and local spending on shelters, and has not ensured access to permanent housing. New York City's sheltered homeless population is at an all-time high—over 63,000 people—and they currently spend \$3.2 billion to provide shelters. In both New York and Massachusetts, the legal right to shelter has impeded, not helped their efforts to end homelessness, because so much of their attention and resources is focused on complying with the legal mandate to fund and provide shelters. Meanwhile, Connecticut has been able to ensure that any family with children that has no other options is provided with access to a shelter and that all people have access to a shelter or a warming center during the Governor's cold weather activation period **without a legal right to shelter**. We strongly urge this Committee to not go down the path of enacting a legal right to shelter.

Our strategy to end homelessness in Connecticut focuses on helping people avoid shelter whenever possible through connection to stable permanent housing, or if it cannot be prevented, to help people get re-housed through rental assistance and services. A right to housing would ensure that every household who is on the brink of homelessness receives problem-solving help, housing navigation, and access to flexible financial assistance to avoid homelessness, and to give everyone whose homelessness cannot be avoided through prevention and diversion with access to services and rental assistance—at levels tailored to their needs and strengths—to get back into permanent housing. We think a bill that ensured access to those two things would guarantee a right to housing.

There are two things we would like the Committee to consider instead of a right to emergency accommodations. First, ensure a right to state and federal rental assistance or subsidized housing in Connecticut for all households who are homeless, on the verge of homelessness, or whose earnings are at or below 30% Area Median Income. If this cannot be ensured through appropriations, the Committee and General Assembly could enact a uniform statewide policy that prioritizes access to all state and federally funded low-income housing and rental assistance programs such that first priority for any and all available units and vouchers would be given to households who are either literally homeless (in shelters or on the streets), leaving institutional settings but with a recent history of homelessness, are within 14 days of becoming literally homeless, or earning at or below 30% of Area Median Income.

Second, we agree with SB 105's focus on homelessness prevention, but would like the Committee to understand that if homelessness prevention is not fully scaled and funded, it is important to target these resources to households who are on the verge or at imminent risk of homelessness first and assist households who are at the earlier stages of housing loss second. Our state calls this targeted form of homelessness prevention 'shelter diversion.' As noted above, shelter diversion is not fully funded. **We think that the more immediate focus should be to fully fund shelter diversion in**



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**our state, and then work to fund primary prevention.** To give you a sense of the scale, we attempt to divert 13,000 households every year, but between 75,000 and 90,000 people call 211 asking for help with housing every year. The National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that there are 125,000 ELI households who are severely rent burdened in our state. We should scale resources so that we can provide housing navigation and assistance to all the 13,000 households first, and then if resources are expanded, to extend this assistance to the 100-125,000 households in Connecticut that call 211 or who are severely rent burdened.

I would also like to state CCEH's opposition to S.B. No. 107 (Raised) An Act Establishing a Task Force Concerning Various Issues at Homeless Shelters. This bill calls for a taskforce to study several issues related to access to homeless shelters including people with service/companion animals, transgender persons, and people who are denied due to background checks for a non-violent crime.

In principle we agree with reducing barriers to shelter entry. However, we see this taskforce as not the right approach for three reasons. First, for shelters that receive state or federal funding, there are already policies enforced by DOH around access to shelter, as well as guidance from HUD. CCEH also provides training to shelters to improve access and ensure quality. We think that issues of access to state- and federally-funded shelters can be better addressed through stronger enforcement by DOH and training and technical assistance by CCEH. We have been working with our coalition and the Department of Housing to set and implement policies that reduce barriers to shelter, including and especially for people who identify as LGBTQ and families of all sizes. We have been discussing ways to accommodate service animals and pets even within limited spaces. We can and will do more to make shelters barrier free and higher quality. Second, it is also unclear how the taskforce would recommend ways to enforce policies for shelters that are solely privately funded as there is no state jurisdiction over these shelters. Third and most importantly, we think this taskforce would distract time and attention away from the more important focus on helping people experiencing homelessness to obtain permanent and stable housing.

I thank you for your time and your continued efforts to end homelessness in Connecticut. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Sarah Fox  
Director of Advocacy and Community Impact  
Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness

